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AUTHOR Sullivan, Peggy
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ABSTRACT

As life becomes more complex and knowledge more necessary for even the simplest kind of life, young people must have access to and knowledge of the tools that will enable them to function in society. Information is critical, and libraries, as purveyors of that information, need support, critical evaluation, and dedicated, committed staff. The educational role of the library involves not only the provision of information but also instructional programs teaching young people to be self-sufficient in obtaining, interpreting, and using that information. (CMJ)

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LIBRARIES, INFORMATION, FREEDOM AND CHILDREN

Prepared at the request of Honorable Carl Perkins

Peggy Sullivan
Assistant Commissioner for Extension Services
The Chicago Public Library
425 North Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60611
Telephone: 312 269 3043

Residence:
953 West Montana
Chicago, Illinois 60614
Telephone: 312 871 0061

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LIBRARIES, INFORMATION, FREEDOM, AND CHILDREN

The year 1979 was the International Year of the Child and the year of the first White House Conference on Libraries and Information Services. The former celebrated the rights of children, and the latter, with several focuses, was concerned with freedom of information, fiscal support of libraries, and the rights of all age groups to the best of library and information service. Without being antithetical in purpose or outcome, there were differences and contradictions in the two events which might benefit from more exploration and concern.

In one of the discussions that preceded the White House Conference, the point was made that libraries have placed too much stress on books and reading, too little on information. Those of us who find personal delight in reading may react to such a statement with strong negatives, but, although I number among those who would find life stale and perhaps unlivable without books and the power of reading, I believe that one aspect of the failure of libraries is that we have not always stressed what we do provide and can provide in the way of information. This is especially critical when we are concerned with library services to youth.

Libraries have been and are places of refuge and pleasure for children and young people. Public libraries are, for many ~~of them,~~ children, the first places where they are recognized as individuals, identified with ~~a~~ library card of their own, welcomed into preschool story hours, and allowed to find things on their own. School libraries extend that freedom and welcome, providing

resources of setting and materials that allow the individuality of reports and the pleasure of search as well as the satisfaction of accomplishment that enriches education. Both kinds of libraries need support from their communities and the sources of their funds to provide all this as well as they are capable of providing it. But because so much of a child's time in a library is associated with pleasure, we do need to remind ourselves that what may seem recreational and/or supplemental to us as adults is often, for children and young people, intellectually demanding and educational in the fullest sense of that word.

An easy example is the story hour for children from three to five years old, a typical public library activity. The day of the week when the story hour is scheduled is special for the child from the beginning because he is aware that his schedule is a part of the library's, the family's pattern. He comes, he has a name tag dropped over his head, he looks over the rest of the group, and he eneters the story hour. It may be the first time he has gone off, escorted by another adult, and left his mother behind. He listens to a story, he is distracted by another child, he gently taps a triangle when a rhythm band is formed, he follows the other children into a circle, he attempts to follow the librarian's nimble fingers in some riming finger games, and before he knows it, it is time to leave. It's a simple experience, and, because it happens all the time, we do not pay much attention to the educational aspects of it. The child has learned to listen, and, perhaps later, over lunch or dinner or in the car on the way home, he is learning to report on his own activities and observations. He has seen himself in reference to others, noting the bravado and the shyness of others, and he senses that all of this is a foreshadowing of school and of the educational life that is waiting for him. What may look like fun to us adults is, indeed, pleasurable for the child, but it represents effort and struggle, action and response. He is getting information in his own way.

When libraries are used in the best ways, they require effort. Learning to use the library and its resources is a valuable tool, useful in many aspects of life. Locational skills are as applicable to road maps or blueprints as they are to libraries or airports. The person who has learned them has learned how to cope with many aspects of life. The heightened interest which librarians have in conveying these skills to others is one of the reassuring trends of our time. The ways of teaching range from the simplest approaches of the elementary school to the formal courses becoming more common in higher education, just as the content includes far more than "something about the Dewey Decimal System," with opportunities for learners to create their own programs on small computers and to become familiar with techniques of searching for information in many formats.

Learning about libraries and learning to use the information they make available depend on freedom. Purposeless meandering through a library may give some moments of pleasure, but it should not be confused with purposeful, satisfying browsing and searching for materials. Just as skill in finding what one wants or needs is somewhat satisfying in itself, even before the need is completely satisfied, freedom of access allows for choice, and, while it may sometimes make life more complex, as freedom has a way of doing, it also makes life more satisfying. And libraries are excellent examples of the tensions that will always exist between full freedom and the rights of all.

Many times, a child's first experience with the rights of commonly-held property is acquired at a library. "Yes, of course, you can take it home," is a welcome statement, but the often-unspoken "But you must bring it back and take care of it so others can enjoy it, too," is a part of that freedom of access being tasted for the first time. The annoyance that library-users experience when they arrive at the right shelf but find it empty of

what they are seeking, or, perhaps worse, find the information they most need has been carefully clipped out by someone ahead of them, is a common enough experience. However, when the solution to it involves an increase in non-circulating materials or heavier security by the library, everyone's freedom is constrained because of the failure of some to recognize the rights of others. And freedom is not limitless. When a small community library offers films for children in its reading room, the regular senior citizens who frequent the library may be annoyed because their space, their light, their quiet are diminished by the children's activity. Every aspect of librarianship, from the design of buildings to the timing of programs or the development of collections of resources, presents trade-offs in rights and responsibilities, opportunities and limitations.

Intellectual freedom works the same way. Free access to information is a benefit to the individual, but, especially in terms of youth, this access may limit the influence of others over the young. The parent who says, "Of course, my kids can read anything," when he means, "...anything I bring into the house for them to read," is really making choices for them, and it is his right to do so. He may be discomfited or angry when they choose books about drugs or pick up information that is biased about their own ethnic group or regligion, but if his efforts to define the range of his own children's freedom result in limitations on the freedom of all young people in his community, they are really censorious. Freedom is fragile but especially precious when it is a part of the heritage of youth.

Other subtle curtailments of it for young people occur when some of the services of libraries are denied them arbitrarily on the basis of age alone. Sometimes, these are denied to all students, as when one must prove one is <u>not</u> a student (not always an easy task) in order to use certain library reference materials. More often, denial of such services as interlibrary loans to children is the kind of curtailment of freedom that diminishes us all.

The International Year of the Child encountered criticism when observers understood that it was a means of drawing attention to the international statement on the rights of children. Parents were warned that their children would be lured away from them into some phony freedoms, and the idea that the practice of freedom requires respect both for those who give the freedom and those who exercise it was too often forgotten in the heat of controversy. We who are concerned about education, libraries, information, and youth need to remind ourselves and others of the obligations that all opportunities entail and the full extent of all freedom which education and information help to provide for us all.

How does all of this apply to the future? As life becomes more complex and knowledge more necessary for the simplest kind of life, we need to be sure that young people have access to the tools that will enable them to construct their lives as they need to do. Information is critical, and libraries as the purveyors of that information need support from all of us, critical evaluation from many of us, and great commitment from those of us who are a part of the library world. The educational role of the library is an important one, and the provision of information is not enough. Educating young people to be self-sufficient in obtaining, interpreting and using that information is an essential function. Instructional programs in library use, development of resources and procedures that make information most generously available, recognition of all the ways that information can be acquired and used, and encouragement of the freedom to search and choose and find develop one's own ideas -- these are the activities that are sure to occupy us in the coming final quarter of the century.